

Sande Anderson

# Kennecott

## Alaskan Utopia

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Somewhere between the heavenly vision of Utopia and the hard reality of the company town lies Kennecott, Alaska. Designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1986, and acquired as an addition to Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve in 1998, Kennecott Mines NHL, the nation's largest and last of the great high-grade copper ore mines, is a rare example of an early-20th-century copper mining camp. Nestled deep in the Wrangell Mountains on National Creek alongside the Kennicott Glacier, the mill camp served as home to managers and professional men with their families. The miners themselves lived isolated from the mill camp far up the mountain at the mines. Aerial tramways served as their connection to the mill complex and camp below. In 1911, the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad connected Kennecott to the Alaskan coast 190 miles away.

The mill town, or camp, most of which stands today, was comprised of the concentration mill and associated structures in a central industrial zone. With its many dormers and chutes, the 14-story mill visually dominated the camp. The sound of the dumping of the ore from the tramcars into the crushers, jigs, impact screens, and Wilfey tables—all moving and refining the ore as needed in its journey from the top of the mill to the waiting train cars below—permeated camp life. All wood frame buildings were painted a uniform red with white trim and the leaching plant, machine shop, power plant, and the general office complex completed the industrial center. To the north of the concentrator were shops, warehouses, storage tanks, and cottages for both railroad and mill staff and families. To the south of the concentrator and adjacent to the railroad grade stood the camp support buildings: the hospital, sawmill, company store, dairy, school, and large three-story bunkhouse for single men with more cottages beyond and above. A tennis court that doubled as an ice rink in winter along with a softball field provided formal outdoor recreation

space. A small cemetery was located about a mile away from camp.

Management decision making at Kennecott matches the complexity and the magnitude of the resource. Immediate stabilization work is designed to hold the built environment until preservation planning leads to appropriate treatment. Visitor use, local resident concerns, funding availability, and good historic preservation principles are among the factors that park managers must consider in order to choose among restoration, rehabilitation, stabilization, or a combination of treatments. Beyond the built environment, park managers must consider the interpretive and educational significance of Kennecott. There are many compelling stories to tell at Kennecott, from the technology to the people. The consideration of Kennecott as a utopian community is one.

The Kennecott Company, whose origins rested with the combined wealth of J.P. Morgan and the Guggenheims, financed the Alaska development to support the extraction of copper for financial gain. Kennecott doesn't fit Roth's taxonomy of the western company town. The conditions of labor, the standard of living, and the health of the community better fit the definition of the utopian model of the utilitarian community than the pejorative designation of company town.

The makeup of the workforce at camp, which was predominately professional men and the well-educated company managers, precluded the labor unrest that characterized most company towns. Miners, typically the more radical proletariat workforce, lived at the mines and did not have their families on site. The only women employed in camp were the nurses and the schoolteacher. In keeping with the time, they left the workforce when they married. Roughly 50% of the workforce in camp worked in the mill. There was no child labor at Kennecott. A young burly Irishman named George Sullivan, who grew up to become Mayor of Anchorage, Alaska's largest city, lied about his age to work at Kennecott when he was 15, breaking the rule that a worker had to be 18 years old or older to work in the mill. There are no documented cases of labor problems at camp. However, oral history interviews reveal that management social engineering put troublemakers of any ilk on the next train out.

In other remote western company towns, the companies often built housing to prevent workers from building substandard housing. The Kennecott company built housing to attract the best and the brightest managers and professional men which created a sense of solidarity common to the utilitarian community. The company built a bunkhouse for single men and single-family houses for married men and their families. The location, size, and amenities of a house were usually commensurate with position in the workforce hierarchy. But this was not a hard and fast rule. One former resident who lived at Kennecott as a child remembers that her family was recruited to the remote location because her brother was near in age to the camp superintendent's son who needed a playmate. To entice her family to move, the superintendent met her mother's stipulation that they have a three-bedroom house so that the girls and the boys could have separate bedrooms. Further diverging from the norm, when her father was promoted and could have moved to a house with indoor plumbing, her mother refused in order to keep the extra bedroom. This was a particularly strong memory, because the child really wanted an indoor bathroom because she was afraid of bears near the outhouse at night.

The community had a sense of self-sufficiency. The houses were attractive and comfortable, heated with steam through underground utilidors (underground corridors which accommodate utilities), the same as all other buildings. The camp carpenter employed utilitarian innovations in construction, such as drawers in the step risers to the second floor. Families kept chickens

and a garden and purchased goods at the company store or from the Sears catalog. Many families had pianos shipped in on the company train. Several former residents reminisced that all the boys had a crush on the piano teacher. There were movies, dances, picnics, and tennis.

The Kennecott Company provided a stable, healthy community with a hospital and school. However, religious practices remained for the most part within the confines of the family, with the mother perhaps reading the Bible on Sunday. The children were well instructed and the husbands were never drunk. The less educated and lower economic class miners were not allowed in camp. Miners passed through on their way into the country or out. The only holidays they enjoyed were July 4 and Christmas. To this day, July 4 in McCarthy, five miles down the tracks, where Kennecott did its sinning, is a celebration not to be missed! The company maintained a quarantine camp outside of camp. As a result, most Kennecott kids never had childhood diseases such as chickenpox or measles.

In many ways, the conditions of life in Kennecott were superior to those in contemporary American society. Families enjoyed the tranquility of a secluded life with little crime, disease, or disruption. The paternalism that was Pullman's undoing thrived in Kennecott because management and labor lived for the most part as equals in camp. At Kennecott, there was a fundamental belief in the solidarity of the community. We do not find the noblesse oblige of Robert Owen, but the common sense of the wealthy young mining engineer, Stephen Birch, who first managed the camp. Kennecott is the utilitarian community somewhere on the continuum between the esoteric, otherworldly utopian dream and the harsh company town.

### Bibliography

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*Sande Anderson is Senior Historian, National Park Service Alaska Support Office, Anchorage, Alaska.*

*The well-ordered complexity of the Kennecott Mill Town, c. 1927. Photo courtesy Wrangell St. Elias National Park & Preserve Collection.*

